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ABSTRACT

The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1987-88 and 1990-91, asked teachers and principals their view of problems in their schools. When asked about a range of school problems including absenteeism, student drug abuse, and physical conflicts among students, teachers and principals could respond that each problem was either a serious problem, moderate problem, minor problem, or not a problem in their schools. The 1990-91 survey demonstrated that both teachers and principals perceive the lack of parental involvement as a serious school problem. Among secondary school teachers, at least 10 percent of public school teachers cited apathy, poverty, absenteeism, disrespect for teachers, parental alcoholism and/or drug abuse, and tardiness as serious school problems. Behaviors and attitudes of students were more likely to be seen as problematic by teachers at the secondary level than at the elementary level. Parental alcoholism was described as "serious" by both public elementary and secondary teachers. Private school teachers were less likely to report student attitudes and behaviors or parental substance abuse as serious problems. In 1991, fewer secondary school teachers at both public and private schools cited student alcohol and drug abuse as serious problems than in 1988. Fewer teachers cited weapons possession as a serious problem in 1991 than in 1988. (TEJ)

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

ISSUE BRIEF

What are the Most Serious Problems in Schools?

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Are schools providing a safe haven in which learning can occur? Concern over this question led to the establishment of the sixth education goal, "By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning." The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 1987-88 and 1990-91, asked teachers and principals their view of problems in their schools. When asked about a range of school problems including absenteeism, student drug abuse, and physical conflicts among students, teachers and principals could respond that each problem was either a serious problem, moderate problem, minor problem, or not a problem in their schools.

Teachers and principals say family factors are serious problems in schools.

In 1990-91, one out of every four public school teachers cited lack of parent involvement as a serious problem in their schools. This problem was also described as "serious" by 4.3 percent of private school teachers. Among both public and private school teachers, this problem topped the list in the percentage of teachers who rated it as a serious problem in their schools. Secondary teachers were more likely than elementary teachers to report lack of parent involvement as a serious problem in their schools.

Table 1.--Percent of teachers who said that lack of parent involvement was a serious problem in their schools

	Total	Elementary	Secondary
Public	25.5	20.6	30.7
Private	4.3	3.0	5.5

School principals agreed that lack of parent involvement was one of the most serious school problems. Among public school principals, poverty was described as a "serious" problem as often as lack of parent involvement. Private school principals cited poverty as a "serious" problem somewhat more often than they cited lack of parent involvement.

Table 2.--Percent of school principals who said that each problem was a serious problem in their schools

	Public	Private
Lack of parent involvement	14.5	2.2
Poverty	14.9	3.8

More secondary school teachers say student attitudes and behaviors are serious problems.

Besides lack of parent involvement, the school problems viewed as serious by at least 10 percent of public school teachers included student apathy, poverty, student absenteeism, student disrespect for teachers, parental alcoholism and/or drug abuse, and student tardiness. Behaviors and attitudes of students were more likely to be seen as problematic by teachers at the secondary level than by teachers at the elementary level. Parent alcoholism, on the other hand, was described as "serious" as often by elementary teachers as by secondary teachers and poverty was described as "serious" more often by elementary teachers.

Private school teachers were much less likely to report that any of the above problems were "serious." The percentage of private school teachers rating each problem as "serious" ranged from .1 percent for student possession of weapons to 4.3 percent for lack of parent involvement.

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Table 3.--Percent of teachers who said that each problem was a serious problem in their schools

	Elementary	Secondary
Public teachers		
Poverty	18.9	15.2
Parental alcoholism	11.6	12.5
Student apathy	10.4	31.7
Student absenteeism	6.1	22.9
Private teachers		
Poverty	1.4	2.6
Parental alcoholism	1.4	3.0
Student apathy	1.7	6.5
Student absenteeism	.7	4.5

Fewer teachers and principals say drug and alcohol use is a serious problem in 1991.

With the completion of the second SASS survey of teachers in 1991, NCES can now report changes in teachers' and principals' perceptions of the seriousness of school problems such as alcohol and drug abuse and school violence.

In 1991, fewer secondary school teachers viewed alcohol and drug abuse by students as serious problems in their schools than in 1988. Teachers' reports of the seriousness of alcohol and drug abuse declined in both public and private secondary schools.

Despite recent increasing attention to the presence of guns and other weapons on school grounds, more teachers did not report that student possession of weapons was a serious problem in 1991 than they did in 1988.

Reports of public secondary school principals in 1991 indicated a decrease in the percentage who viewed drug and alcohol use by students as a serious problem. About 12 percent of public secondary school principals said that alcohol use was a "serious" problem in 1988 compared with 7 percent in 1991. The percentage who said that drug abuse was "serious" decreased from 5.4 percent in 1988 to 2.6 percent in 1991.

Table 4.--Percent of secondary school teachers and school principals who viewed student alcohol use, drug abuse, or weapons possession as a serious problem, 1988 and 1991

	School Teachers		School Principals	
	1988	1991	1988	1991
Public				
Alcohol use	21.5	16.1	11.7	7.1
Drug abuse	14.9	8.2	5.4	2.6
Weapons possession	2.6	2.2	.3	.5
Private				
Alcohol use	6.6	4.5	3.4	.8
Drug abuse	3.0	.9	1.9	.4
Weapons possession	.3	.1	0	--

--Too few cases for a reliable estimate.

While there was no change in the percentage of private secondary school principals who viewed drug abuse as a serious problem between 1988 and 1991, the percentage who viewed alcohol use as a serious problem decreased during this period, from 3.4 percent to .8 percent.

Very few public or private school principals reported that student possession of weapons was a serious problem in their schools. While only about .5 percent of public secondary school principals said that this was a serious problem in 1988 and 1991, virtually none of the private school principals said that weapons possession was a serious problem.

For more information, see the following reports:

Choy, S.P., Medrich, E.A., Henke, R.R., Bobbitt, S.A. *Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1987-88.* National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 92-120.

Kaufman, S. *1988 Schools and Staffing Survey Sample Design and Estimation.* National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 91-127.

Kaufman, S. *1990-91 SASS: Sample Design and Estimation.* National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 92-151.

Mansfield, W., Alexander, D., and Farris, E. *Teacher Survey on Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools.* National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 91-091.

Issue Briefs present information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences reported are statistically significant at the .05 level. In the design, conduct, and data processing of NCES surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error.

This **Issue Brief** was prepared by Sharon A. Bobbitt, NCES and Carol L. Rohr, Pinkerton Computer Consultants. For further information about this **Issue Brief** or the 1987-88 or 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey, contact the Special Surveys and Analysis Branch, National Center for Education Statistics, 555 New Jersey Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20208-5651, (202) 219-1325.

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